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Time in Organizations: Constraints on, and Possibilities for Gender Equity in the Workplace

By

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Life holds one great but quite commonplace mystery. Though shared by each of us and known to all, it seldom rates a second thought. That mystery, which most of us take for granted and never think twice about, is time.
Calendars and clocks exist to measure time, but that signifies little because we all know that an hour can seem an eternity or pass in a flash, according to how we spend it.
Time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart.

From Momo by Michael Ende

Momo, in Michael Ende's charming tale, lives in a world where people's lives are not held to the clock, and so they have time to talk and to reflect, and to do their work in a way that enhances them and their community. Until, that is, the time thieves, the men in grey, appear on the scene and convince the community that every second must be saved. They count up the seconds wasted and convince the people to put them into a timesaving bank. Pretty soon the community begins to change. No longer is there time to reflect, or to go to the fields and have Momo listen to one's worries and thus make them disappear, or to enjoy the open air, or to spend time with one's friends and family. Everyone is too busy saving seconds to put into the timesaving bank. Pretty soon the community looks like life as we know it and as it is experienced by women and men in today's corporate world. But our time thieves are not the men in grey; they are our own collective conception of time as an external, objective marker of competitive success in an ever faster-paced, global world.

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In pre-industrial times, when home was a production-consumption unit, time had a cyclical, repetitive, task-oriented aspect to it. But with the movement of production outside the home and the gendered separation of men into economic production roles under industrial, clock time, and women into caring roles, time began to be seen as a problem. In the public, economic sphere – where men predominate – industrial time came to be seen as a commodity, to be bought and sold (Thompson, 1967; Giddens, 1987; Adam, 1990), while women's caring work in the private, domestic arena, continued to follow the pre-industrial temporal pattern .

This gendered separation of spheres has pitted a "nurturing or responsibility rationality" against a "technical-economic" one, with the first embedded in a caring or process sense of time, the second in industrial clock time. In societies, such as ours, where economic value dominates, the former becomes defined as feminine, cyclical, and undervalued. The latter, in contrast – masculine, linear, and economically productive – becomes the dominant temporal mode (Davies, 1990). All of this, the separation of spheres and the commodification of time in the dominant economic arena, leads to a sense of scarcity of time and the kind of life that the grey men brought to Momo's community (Marks, 1977; Fabian, 1983). Though there are women who have always negotiated multiple times (e.g. Hall, 1983; Whipp, 1994; Glucksman, 1998; Jurczyk, 1998), the current dominant conception remains anchored in the economic, masculine sphere.

Jules Henry, an anthropologist, writes in his 1965 book Pathways to Madness of the close connection in the industrial world between time and people's emotional lives.

He talks of two ways to transform "astronomical time into social time" – by empathy, as in well-functioning close relationships, or by fear, as in most hierarchical connections:

> Everyday affairs bind the time of all of us. A man's time is bound from the moment he opens his eyes in the morning until he quits for the day.... None of that time – from getting up in the morning till quitting time – is his own, because he has sold it to the job. Sold time is bound and is governed by fear. Time not so bound, time that is not sold, is unbound and is therefore free for empathy and love (Henry, 1965, p. 14).

The trouble, according to Henry, is that bound time or work ("sold time") controls fear, with the result that time that is not used productively creates anxiety: "When work binds anxiety, not to work frees it" (p. 15), which results in bound time dominating unbound, empathic time.

So, as women move in ever increasing numbers into the dominant world of paid employment (bound time), they face norms and practices that seem to conflict with the responsibilities and pleasures associated with an unbounded, more subjective sense of time (cf. Daly, 1996). Nor does this clock-based, objective way of organizing working time any longer fit all men, and it certainly doesn't fit women (Kanter, 1977; Hewitt, 1993). From it has emerged a pattern of work practices and work norms that create barriers to women's careers and difficulties for both men and women to integrate their work lives with their personal lives.

And so we are faced with the situation that work is organized around industrial time, even as the character of work changes to a post-industrial mode. We want employees to have a quicker, more flexible response to their tasks and to environmental changes; we want them to coordinate their work in more interdependent, less hierarchical ways; we count on their commitment, their intrinsic involvement with work as a source

of motivation. And yet, all of this is superimposed on a notion of time that fits the industrial age, which makes it difficult to reach these post-industrial goals.

Temporal Norms in Organizations

Organizational temporal norms are so ingrained, so taken for granted, that they seem immutable. One is hardly aware how they determine how one works, and how current work practices continuously recreate and reinforce them (Orlikowski and Yates, 1999). And so, in response to faster product development cycles, to globalization which breaks the cycle of day and night, to new technologies like the cell phone and the pager that allow for continuous accessibility, one finds work encroaching on all aspects of life. This clearly has an ill effect on employees' health, as well as on their families and communities. But it is assumed to be necessary in order to remain competitive. It is this connection that our work has challenged (Rapoport and Bailyn, et al., 1996; Bailyn, Fletcher, and Kolb, 1997; Perlow, 1997; Fletcher, 1999). For, when we look at how time is used and how cultural norms and assumptions that surround time affect work practices, we find that these same norms also have a negative effect on organizational effectiveness

The basic underlying character of industrial time that neither fits current demographics and life styles, nor the needs of organizations in a knowledge-based, globally competitive world, is that it is based on the clock. Though most work is no longer controlled by punching a time clock, clock time – objective, abstracted from the situation – continues to guide work practice. For example, national labor law, which was enacted to deal with depression conditions, is geared entirely to the clock and actually constrains some innovative flexible time arrangements that would benefit both employees

and their employers. And we know that companies prize punctuality and give demerits for lateness. It seems, at times, that it is more important to be present than to produce (Perin, 1991; Perlow, 1997). There are examples of people leaving their lights on and their coats over a chair to indicate presence even when they are not physically in their offices. Taking time off in the middle of the day is easier than leaving work early. The emphasis on face time is based on the clock, and is still seen as important for career success (Bailyn, 1993).

But it is not at all clear that this emphasis is effective for accomplishing organizational tasks. Task time is not the same as clock time. Tasks, as defined in a particular context, have their own rhythms and cycles within that situation. And the emphasis on clock time may prevent work from entraining to those cycles in a productive way (Ancona and Chong, 1996). Look at the reaction to comp time. There are still companies that pay overtime rather than providing time off after a particularly hard push to meet a deadline. And one middle manager complained bitterly that after an exhausting trip his company insisted he appear in the office, even though there was nothing particular to do. Similarly, salesmen are expected to check in at the beginning and end of the day, even when their appointments are far away. All of this adds to working hours and to pressure on employees without producing value for the organization. Thus, work practices anchored to clock time can be inefficient when viewed from the point of view of organizational tasks.

In our work in organizations we have actually found people, a minority to be sure, who do work differently. For example, a few program officers in one research foundation where travel to client countries is highly valued, managed to accomplish their

work with much less travel than their peers. And a few engineers in a high-pressured product development group found ways to meet their deliverables as well as the needs of the overall project by more up-front planning, more thoughtful approaches to coordination, more concern about the project as a whole rather than only their individual parts, and thus were able to be productive without the same long hours of work put in by their peers. Two points are relevant about these examples. First, these constructive modifications in work practices were usually made by employees with time constraints, often women with child care responsibilities, which shows that when necessary, it is possible to adjust the way of working to "work smart, not long." But, second, these changes, though clearly effective, were invisible and not recognized as signs of competence (see Fletcher, 1999). The underlying norm of clock time as a referent point was too strong.

A number of temporal norms flow from clock time that, I believe, constrain the way we work as well as our personal lives. Three, in particular, seem to be critical:

1. a presumed linear relation between time put in and output
2. a tendency to throw time at problems
3. coordination by instant accessibility

Linear Relation Between Time Put In and Output. Part of the effect of reckoning time by the clock, is that it abstracts time from the tasks being accomplished By this linear, objective logic, there is a clear and predictable relation between the amount of time one devotes to a task and the output expected from that work. Hence 12 hours of work will produce twice as much as 6 hours, and every additional hour will add a fixed amount to the product. From personal experience, of course, we know this not to be true.

For many people a few hours in the morning are three times as productive as the same amount at night, and vice versa for others. Also, as we all know, fatigue sets in. The first hour at a task, or at least the first hour after any necessary start-up issues have been settled, is usually considerably more productive than the fifth, or tenth.

And yet, time and productivity continue to be framed in this linear relationship. This conception of time is based on a machine logic. Even though machines also show signs of fatigue, on the whole their output is regular and predictable; they do produce twice as much in 12 hours than in six. But when this logic is applied to human workers, especially to knowledge workers, it becomes clear that what is served is control, rather than production. Perin (1991) distinguishes between a panopticon discourse, a logic of authority and control, and a performance discourse, which shifts to a logic of work. The assumption that time put into work is linearly related to output is part of the logic of control.

A consequence of this logic is that time put into work becomes the primary indicator of good performance and success. One engineering manager, for example, explained that he knows who his good engineers are when "they don't know enough to go home." And in his division, people were in their cubicles at all hours of the day and night, even though, as some admitted, there was no real reason to be there. So time becomes a proxy for output, which happens particularly in those situations where individual output is difficult to measure, as for example in knowledge work.

There is evidence, moreover, that the linear relation between time and productivity does not apply even to very output-oriented work. For example, Bank of America was testing the value of offering part time work to its check processors. The

measure of performance was easy in this case: the number of checks processed. What they found was that the average output for full-time employees was 1,200 to 1,300 checks per hour, compared to 1,500 to 1,650 for part-time workers (quoted in Olmsted and Smith, 1994, p. 97). Others have also found the hourly productivity advantage of reduced hours work (cf. Cohen and Gadon, 1978; Ronen, 1984).

The presumed linear relationship between time and productivity, therefore, seems not only to add stress to employees' lives through its reinforcement of long hours, but may actually interfere with the efficiency of work. Take the example of a small computer company. When employees found their workday expanding, they declared they would no longer work past 5 PM. And, surprisingly, they discovered that they could do the same amount of work in this shortened day as they had previously done (described in Bailyn, 1993, p. 82). Obviously, using time as an indicator of high performance in this case would have meant rewarding inefficiency instead of productivity. This conclusion is confirmed by psychological experiments that show that when time is constrained, work that must be done can be fitted into whatever time is available (see Bluedorn and Dernhardt, 1988, for a summary).

These examples point to the negative consequences of conceiving of time as linearly related to productivity. First, this norm leads to evaluation procedures that use the input measure of time as a proxy for output, which reinforces the tendency toward ever longer hours at work. And second, it provides no incentive for more effective work practices based on a reframing of long hours as a sign of inefficiency, rather than of productivity.

Throwing Time at Problems. There was a time when companies threw people at problems. But since reengineering and "rightsizing" this solution is no longer used. Now, it is time that is thrown at problems. People pull all-nighters to finish a sales presentation; a slipping deadline in a project leads to evening and weekend work; a shorter time to market means longer hours for each individual working on the product. Problems are dealt with by people working harder and longer, and the organization is in a continuous crisis mode.

There are obvious difficulties with this picture. Such an approach precludes attention to the prevention of problems, to up-front planning designed to minimize the continuous sense of crisis, to the tendency to consider everything equally urgent and important. And the individualized incentive system in most high-pressure situations, where rewards are given to individuals who visibly solve problems, reinforces this tendency. Perlow (1997, 1999) gives a vivid example of the dynamics underlying this norm.

She studied a group of design engineers. Because they were working on a product with an unusually short time-to-market goal, they found themselves working longer and longer hours. Some engineers would come in during the night to finish individual assignments they could not get done during the regular working day. Why? Because they were constantly interrupted: by others asking for help, by nervous managers asking for frequent progress reports, by meetings called to deal with the problems that emerged. Everyone was aware of the stress they were under, but no one questioned the necessity of these long hours in order to meet the tight schedule. The belief that

problems can be solved by throwing time at them prevented this group from rethinking their work patterns into what might have been a more effective mode.

The situation described by Perlow exhibits two temporal confusions. First is the confusion between pace and duration. The group implicitly assumed that in order to decrease the duration, i.e. a shorter time to market, the pace must speed up. And, second, there was confusion between individual time and system time (Bailyn, 1993). There was an unrecognized, taken-for-granted assumption in this group that the only way to shorten system time was for the individuals involved to throw more time at the effort, i.e. to work longer hours. Time was seen as an individual resource but problems were defined at the system level. There was no realization that individual work patterns and project developments each proceeded at different rates and with different pacing, and that there was a need to mesh these temporalities (Perlow, 1999).

Coordination by Instant Availability. The belief in the importance of having people always around (in case they are needed) permeates the structure of work. Now, with the pressure of global contact as well as technologies like cell phones, e-mail, and pagers, work is beginning to move to a 24/7 pattern. Again, an expansion of time – which has been called the "last frontier" (Melbin, 1978). But the assumption that one needs instant access in order to coordinate work feeds inefficiencies in the system. It allows the system to be entirely reactive, instead of emphasizing the value of pre-planning and learning from reflection on past performance.

So, for example, a manager of a newly distributed team discovered, much to his surprise, that having to plan meetings in advance, which he previously had not had to do, actually enhanced the value of the meetings (Bailyn, 1988). The necessity to think about

an agenda, instead of being able to bring people together on the spur of the moment, made the work of the group more rather than less effective. Similarly, in the engineering design group described by Perlow and mentioned above, changing the structure of the day to include periods of "quiet time" where no one was available to anyone else, allowed the group to work more efficiently.

The tension about working from home is an interesting example of the power of this norm. Managers are reluctant to have their employees out of the office and are likely to insist that even when they are working from home they remain accessible during normal working hours. But this defeats some of the organizational and personal gains from this way of working which center on the control over time, and on building in the advantages that can be gained from asynchronous coordination. For example, people have individual cycles of productivity. In one study of systems workers it was found that one quarter of them had their most productive periods of work outside the 9-5 period, but because they had to be in the office during this "normal" time, they could not take advantage of their personal productivity cycle. In contrast, an equivalent group working from home did have control over their time and were able to use it advantageously (Bailyn, 1994). Managers, of course, had to learn to manage in a different way, and discovered that coordinating work by clearly specifying goals, rather than monitoring continuously the conduct of the work, had clear advantages (Judkins, et al., 1985).

These examples show that continuous accessibility is not necessarily the most effective way to manage and coordinate work. But this norm is so basic, and so embedded in the notions of control based on clock time, that it is not easy to consider alternatives.

Summary. Taken together, these temporal norms emerge from industrial time, a sense of time guided by the clock in an external, linear, objective way. They lead to long hours and an emphasis on presence, on the input rather than the output of work. They reinforce face time, crisis management, lack of planning, solving rather than preventing problems. They leave little time for reflection or for rethinking work practices, and thus these norms constrain innovative patterns of working. They also make it difficult to take advantage of differences in individual or task time cycles.

These norms also have clear consequences for society. They create stress and burnout for individual workers which translate into productivity loss and health costs. They also contribute to the crisis of care we are currently concerned with: the care of children, of elders, and of communities. And, finally, they reinforce gender inequities. Women are more likely to be care givers and hence more likely to have constrained hours. Even though, as mentioned above, they are often able to be productively innovative in the way they work, as long as such innovation is not recognized and valued, and as long as long hours are seen as an indicator of top performance, they are unlikely to win in the selection for top positions. These temporal norms, therefore, derail our attempts to achieve a gender equitable workplace.

Alternatives to Clock Time

In contrast to industrial time, which dominates in the public economic sphere, we can look to the private sphere, to what some have called "natural" or "social" time (Nowotny, 1975). This is a conception of time that is subjective, rather than objective, geared to events rather than to the clock; cyclical, rather than linear; and anchored in a

logic of care. Some have called it "feminine" or "process" time (Davies, 1990, Jurczyk, 1998). It differs from industrial time by not being commodified or quantified, not seen as a resource to hand out, waste, control, or sell (Adam, 1990). It is Henry's (1965) unbounded time, responsive to and constitutive of the tasks and ineractions one is currently involved with. It is integrally linked to activities, not abstracted from them (Adam, 1990). It conceives of time as more personal, more expansive, more responsive, more socially and situationally defined than "public time," which is "occupied, measured, and allotted by the powers that be" (Fabian, 1983, p. 144).

It is the difficulty of integrating this more personal sense of time with industrial production time that makes women's lives, and increasingly also men's, so difficult. And since the economic sphere provides the dominant temporal mode, what we find today is that clock time is invading the private sphere. Overworked parents spend one hour of "quality time" with their children, which results in alternate periods of attention and neglect geared to the clock rather than the needs of the child. In other situations, as well, we see the commodification of care: doctors in HMOs are guided by productivity goals, the number of patients per hour, independent of their needs; paid care givers are controlled by the clock. In all of these cases, quality goes down. All life begins to be guided by a scarcity approach to time. Is there an alternative?

Stephen Marks, in a 1977 essay, laid out a different approach, an expansion approach to time, commitment, and energy. He locates scarcity in the gendered separation of spheres and in the socially defined imbalance of commitments. Hence overload results from an over-commitment to work, an over-commitment that is continually recreated and reinforced by ongoing work practices and patterns of

recognition and reward. Such an imbalance leads to a sense of scarcity of time and energy in any other area of life. In contrast, his thesis is that a balanced commitment structure would lead to a different understanding of time, one that would create rather than deplete one's energy. In other words, he claims that feelings of time scarcity and the consequent depletion of energy stem from an imbalance of commitments, not from an absolute lack of hours. An analogous argument has been made on the individual level by Barnett and colleagues (1985, 1992), who have shown that multiple roles for men and women are not a recipe for tension and conflict, but actually alleviate stress and enhance well-being.

So the question arises what actions would be necessary to bridge these two domains. Instead of bringing clock time from the world of work into the home, as is currently happening, what could one do to bridge these domains in a more equitable way? To do so would require a more fluid, more responsive orientation to time, one that would flow with the needs of the moment, responding to a situation as it is evolving. It would be based on an enacted sense of time, which "suggests that time is experienced both objectively (when we use it to coordinate our action), and subjectively (when we create or change temporal parameters through our action)" (Orlikowski and Yates, 1999, p. 12) With such an orientation to time one would not substitute pace for duration, but that could be a gain, not a loss, since neither creative work nor caring work can be compressed into a fixed period of time. Such an approach raises the possibility of designing work to be responsive both to the defined work tasks and to the temporal needs of employees' private lives.

Let me give one example of how this might be done. It stems from one of a number of action research projects that I have been involved in over the past decade with a number of different colleagues (see e.g., Rapoport and Bailyn, et al., 1996; Rapoport, et al., 1998; Bailyn, Fletcher, and Kolb, 1997). In these projects, based on what we have called the *dual agenda*, we work with organizations to change work practices to meet the double goal of easing employees' lives and at the same time making the work more effective. The particular example I want to give deals with the portfolio analysis group of a large bank (Bailyn and Rayman, et al., 1998; Rayman, et al., 1999).

The work of this department consists of preparing financial reports for senior management and the board. The department is divided into groups, each of which has its own area of specialization but is sequentially involved with the work of the other groups. Thus there are both many independent areas of work and much need for coordination. Deadlines are often tight and top managers frequently ask for re-dos or for specific information that is not part of the standard reports, but ad hoc. Thus workload is heavy and hours are long.

Because of a recent reorganization, the group, when we worked with them, consisted of a number of people who had very long commutes. To ease their personal problems they had requested permission to work from home one or two days a week. But this was not allowed by the bank. The manager was concerned about problems of coordination. She had tried hard to get the group to set up a plan for their work that would make it easier to ensure that all parts of these reports were ready at the appropriate time, but this had never happened.

As part of the action research project, the bank agreed to a 3 month experiment where members of the group could work at home up to 2 days a week, and others were allowed to have flexible hours, again something that had not previously been approved. The bank even contributed equipment to the telecommuters. And though these workers could not at home be attached to the office LAN, they could be linked through another city to the system that carried the data they needed.

The telecommuters were now working in a different temporal mode. They had shifted from control by objective clock time to a more personally responsive approach. People reported that they were able to participate in family events they had never before been able to, and could do their work at those times of the day and night that fitted best into their personal productivity and their family temporal patterns. They also created more time by not commuting every day of the week. And when the office LAN went down for three days and they were the only ones able to get any work done, the advantage of a variety of responses to the tasks of the organization became obvious to everyone.

The results of the experiment were increased productivity and increased ability to respond to personal needs. And, perhaps most telling, in accomplishing these goals, the unit found a different way of coordinating work. Now the plan that their manager had tried vainly to put into place became a reality, because it was deemed necessary to support this more responsive, expansive use of time. When eveyone was in the office, governed by the norms of clock time, there was no obvious need to shift to this more effective way of working. Also, morale was up in the unit, and people were less stressed. As one bank employee who interacted with this unit said: "they look much less frenzied."

This example shows that work designed around a less rigid, more encompassing sense of time can indeed meet the dual agenda. It can ease employees' lives and at the same time be more effective for accomplishing work goals. Both time and energy expand.

Conclusion

One of the reasons it continues to be difficult to create gender equity in the workplace, even after years of affirmative action, equal opportunity legislation, and good will on the part of most employers, is the dominance that clock time has over our lives. It is critical, therefore, to consider what work practices would look like if they were designed in accordance with a more responsive and expansive sense of time. By relinquishing the time bounds on work, this approach would allow work activity to follow the ebb and flow of organizational tasks. By necessity it would create a more collaborative environment, and coordination would have to be more planned because it would no longer be possible to coordinate by immediate access. There would have to be more multi-skilling, more human redundancy and slack. In many ways, this is already the direction organizations are trying to go. But they are often not successful because their efforts continue to be embedded in an objective, abstracted conception of time.

Most important, such a different approach to the design and practice of work will allow all employees, men and women alike, to integrate their work with their personal lives, and help to make gender equity in the workplace more of a reality. But creating such a situation will not be easy. It will require a different synchronization between the public and private spheres, where these are not seen as separate, or as differentially

valued by society, or as differently committed to by employees. Clearly a distant ideal, but one that will never occur if we continue to construct time and its role in our lives as objective and external, and as based entirely on the clock and a fixed calendar

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